

DEPOTALK

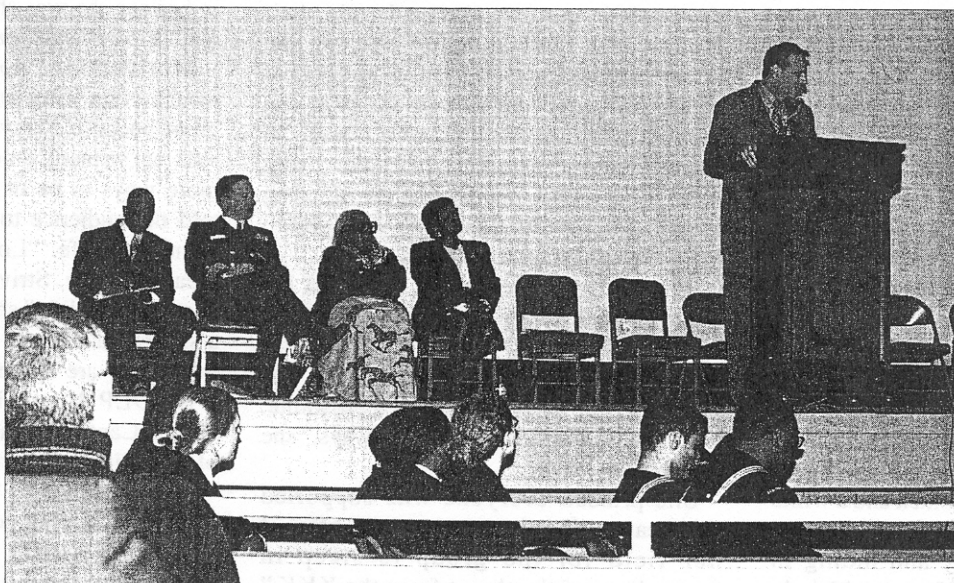
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Dr. King legacy remembered by NADEP

By Bill Bartkus



Chauncey Mathews, NADEP North Island EEOAC co-chairman; NADEP North Island Commanding Officer Pete Laszcz; Dr. Juanita Browne, Dee Sanford and members of the *USS Nimitz* (CVN 68) gospel choir listen as U.S. Rep Bob Filner delivers the keynote address during the Martin Luther King Jr., commemoration in the North Island Theater. Photo by Joe Feliciano

Naval Air Depot North Island and a gospel choir from the carrier *USS Nimitz* (CVN 68) joined hands on Jan. 17 to remember and commemorate the legacy of slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. NADEP North Island's Equal Employment Opportunity Advisory Committee sponsored the 90-minute event in the North Island Naval Air Station Theater. Chauncey Mathews, Code 6.2.5.1, EEOAC co-chairman, was the emcee.

U.S. Rep. Bob Filner (D-Calif.), who represents San Diego's 50th congressional district, was the keynote speaker. Other speakers included Dee Sanford, and Dr. Juanita Browne, president and founder of San Diego's Imani Kuumba College.

Filner was active in the struggle for civil rights and knew King personally during the

final years of his life. Filner joined the first freedom rides in 1961 and was arrested and jailed for several months in Tennessee.

"I studied nonviolence at his feet and knew him for the last 10 years of his life. Dr. King helped overthrow the so-called Jim Crow laws, the laws that separated us by race," said Filner.

During his freedom rides, Filner recalled, he saw those signs all over the South that read, "Whites" and "Coloreds" over water fountains. Seeing restaurants refusing to serve blacks and schools that were segregated were also among his memories.

He said that King challenged the immoral laws against blacks with nonviolence because, "Dr. King wanted people to think about what was going on. If someone hits you and you hit them back," Filner said, "then you have a fight. And everyone wants

to know who won the fight. But if you're hit and don't react, then people wonder why."

He said that the freedom rides led to many successes. "There wasn't a black cop in Alabama in 1961. There wasn't a black political office holder," the four-term congressman said. "But when we went back for the 35th anniversary of the freedom rides, we were welcomed by the black police chief and escorted by the black city council people and state assembly people. Birmingham and Selma, Ala., have black mayors.

"All this was accomplished by the lessons of the civil rights movement," Filner said. "Ordinary Americans – young, old, black, white, Hispanic – changed the course of American history. We weren't special people. We were people who were just trying to say that America ought to live up to its dreams like Dr. King said."

(see over)

Browne recalled her days of discrimination in the South. She declined an invitation by the president to participate in the 35th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march because of her health. "Not my physical health, but my mental health," she said. "I couldn't bear to relive the memories of police dogs, fire hoses, electric cattle prods or the suffering that I and others went through in jail at the hands of the sheriff. I just did not want to remember."

But she decided to return to Selma in the form of her speech and told the audience of the atrocities she endured to change the course of America.

She recalled those days when the sheriff shot and killed a white minister because he tried to save a small black girl from tear gas. She remembered King confronting the sheriff and vividly remembers a button the sheriff wore that showed a black and a white together saying never. She remembered marching during the day and hiding in churches at night. "An 89-year-old lady brought me her meager food allowance and then the sheriff had her allowance withdrawn. A woman took me into her home so I could recover from double pneumonia."

Then King appeared and Browne said that he could motivate a person into doing anything the person didn't know that he could do. "Then the whole country came to help us. People such as movie stars, nuns, priests, rabbis, ministers and entertainers. Blacks and whites who previously didn't have the courage or the desire to help."

She recalled the sheriff warning her that "since I was wearing a University of

Massachusetts sweatshirt, he knew where to send my body." She recalls the sheriff's deputies who told them that they could sleep on the streets outside the church and then drove their motorcycles and rode their horses over their sleeping bodies. She remembered that she dragged an injured civil rights worker to the side of the road and then knocked on the door of a house. "A sweet old lady dressed in a black dress with a lace collar, took one look at the bleeding friend and spit on us and then struggled to lift a cement block to drop on us."

She said that the sheriff received his comeuppance before he died by telling the audience that during a visit to New York City, a newspaper had reported that he was conned out of all his money by a prostitute. "God really works in mysterious ways," she said with a laugh.

She praised everyone who supported their cause like the woman who offered her field for the group to sleep in "regardless of the threat from the KKK." She also had high regard for Dan Blocker (Hoss Cartwright on "Bonanza") who carried an outhouse on his shoulders during a 15-mile march. "Just so we could have a bathroom," she replied.

She had praise for those who marched 50 miles wearing plastic shoes and she saw for herself their bloodied feet following the event. And she spoke about a white man who was so moved by Dr. King's rhetoric that he marched with them even though he didn't have legs. "He was bleeding under his arms from his crutches," he recalled.

She explained how the group tried to rent cars at the end of the march to take them back home. But the company wouldn't rent cars to blacks. "So a woman rented a car and in her car she was shot to death in front of me," Browne said tearfully.

Motivational speaker Dee Sanford recalled that King said, "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve." She said that so many times we don't think about more ways to be of service to others. She told the audience to make a difference in someone's life. "Look for ways to be of greater service. Strive to make a difference in someone's life," she said. "Give someone a smile, shake their hand. Tell people how much they are appreciated."

NADEP North Island Commanding Officer Capt. Pete Laszcz said that the words of Dr. King are prophetic, yet sobering. "They challenge us to recommit ourselves to the principles of personal sacrifice, social justice and equality for all. Let our spirits be rekindled, our souls uplifted and our lives enriched by the words and deeds of a great American, a noble statesman and an inspirational leader."

The commemoration included gospel songs by Willie White, with Naval Air Technical Data and Engineering Service Command, himself a freedom rider, and the *Nimitz* Gospel Choir. Ree Barnett, Code 6.1.1, led the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance. Musician 1st Class Steven Brown, with Navy Band Southwest, played a musical selection, and Navy chaplains gave the invocation, read from scripture and gave the benediction.